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CHILDREN IN CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a crisis in youth mental health fueled by social media, stress, loneliness, inequity and other factors. What are the warning signs? Where are the resources? How do young people and families cope? Below, essays by a mother whose child died, a college student and three recent graduate students explore the difficulties of young people and put their problems in context.



JESSICA PARGA U-T

Lynn Solorzano sits with a portrait of her daughter, Ashley, in the garden she made in her memory at her home in Escondido. Ashley was killed in 2021 at the age of 25.

HOW OUR DAUGHTER'S DEATH IS A LIFE LESSON FOR OTHERS

BY LYNN SOLORZANO

We lost our daughter Ashley due to mental illness, homelessness and drug use. This is her story.

Ashley was born and raised in San Diego. She was fiercely independent, rebellious, impulsive and moody. She didn't listen to anyone and marched to the beat of her own drum. Unfortunately, she also suffered from mental illness.

Against our wishes, she left home at age 17 with only a tote bag of clothes and her cellphone. Having nowhere to go, she went to live on the streets of San Diego. We were terrified. She was a beautiful, petite young girl with no street smarts. We felt helpless as Ashley spent the last years of her young life homeless — she didn't want help.

Before she left home, we were able to get her into a county-sponsored program called Pathways Catalyst. This program provided her temporary housing, bus passes, help applying for social services and rehab. However, she didn't accept much of this help. She once had a studio in Downtown San Diego, but psychosis took hold and she returned to the streets.

Soon, she stopped taking her prescribed medications (which helped keep her balanced) and began using illicit drugs. This dangerous behavior sometimes led her to experience drug-induced psychosis, often for months at a time.

Tragically, on Feb. 24, 2021, at age 25, she was killed when she was hit by a car while attempting to cross the freeway during another terrible psychotic episode.

Our love for Ashley was unconditional, and we never stopped trying to save her from her poor choices. Ashley's story is much like many other individuals who are young, independent and have their own ideas about how to make a life for themselves — away from their families and any support that is offered. Mental illness can make it nearly impossible for a person to make good decisions or know what's best for them.

Ashley slipped out of the mental health care system and psychiatric facilities multiple times because she was able to demonstrate (if only for a short while) she was stable and able to care for herself, even though she had a long, documented psychiatric history which indicated otherwise. Her dad and I were very close to our last (and best) resort, which was to obtain conservatorship of her. Our hope was that she could get well and lead a productive, happy life. It was not to be — the system failed her.

During this tumultuous journey, we were told several times by psychiatrists that she wasn't "gravely disabled enough." We were advised by one private hospital that no doctor would sign off on a conservatorship and by another that the doctor simply didn't have time to review her file. In her last hospital stay, doctors discharged her within 24 hours during a 72-hour hold for 5150, during which individuals are held against their will while doctors evaluate their mental status. The admitting physician diagnosed her with drug-induced psychosis. She was given a sedative and quickly released the next day; she wasn't even treated! Her fatal accident occurred 10 days later.

Our mental health system is severely flawed. Countless loopholes and requirements for people who need services prevent them from getting help. People fall through the cracks. Government funds are allocated to hundreds of programs, but it isn't helping enough people; untreated individuals continue to suffer. Additionally, once someone is released from the mental hospital or jail, there often isn't a transitional program for additional support or treatment. Hospitals and jails have revolving doors. People are left to their own devices; some don't even realize they need help. Often, the ones who need the most help are left to die on the streets (like my daughter).

As a preteen, Ashley was obsessed with her looks and the clothes she wore. However, once she became homeless, her clothes were often lost, stolen or dirty. When we brought her clothes, her eyes would light up. She loved them, even if they were gently worn.

In January 2022, I created a nonprofit called Ashley's Hope. Our organization provides clothing to the homeless. All people, no matter their situation, need to be treated with love, kindness and dignity and respect — that is our hope. That was Ashley's hope.

I miss Ashley with all my heart and soul. Her lifelong struggle with mental illness, and subsequent homelessness, was not in vain. Her story spreads awareness and now helps support those who are currently homeless as well as the people who are rebuilding their lives — through Ashley's Hope.

Solorzano is president of the nonprofit Ashley's Hope. She lives in Escondido. Visit ashleyshope.org or contact her at lynn@ashleyshope.org to donate funds or drop off clothing donations.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES RISING AMONG YOUTH

BY NICK ALCORN

Youth around the world get up each day and go through our lives, but many of us carry various weights that make it hard to do so. The state of mental health among young people is ever-complicated, and it has become apparent that there is a crisis at hand.

There are many aspects of this that can be reported using quantitative data. According to a study reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2021, 37 percent of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44 percent reported feeling sad or hopeless in the year leading up to the study. There were also significant numbers of students who were experiencing emotional abuse (55 percent), physical abuse (11 percent) and a parent losing their job (29 percent) while at home during the pandemic. All of these numbers reveal many very real challenges that individual students cope with, each with varying levels of support or hope that their situation will improve.

Yet the pandemic didn't exclusively create new widespread mental health issues among youth as a whole. Instead, it exacerbated so many issues that were not as visible or seemingly prevalent as they became after the country (and the world) had to shut down. Social isolation, depression and so many other mental health-related struggles grew because so many young people were separated from almost everyone (and everything) they knew.

I'm 18 now, and the pandemic created a lot of space for personal growth for me, but I also began to experience increased anxiety both about the outside world that seemed to be falling apart, and my own struggles with being stuck at home. When I returned to school and entered my junior and senior years, I experienced an increased amount of angst and stress surrounding school, along with an extremely diminished ability to focus on anything. Many of my peers struggled as well, because of the pandemic and the frustrations of adolescence.

The word "crisis" often has a connotation of hopelessness, but I hope that more people begin to see it as a call to action now. There is a lot of great work being done by people who know how important it is for our society to acknowledge mental health. I'm continuously inspired by the increased discourse about coping mechanisms, resources and personal stories on social media and other venues. I have also joined efforts to increase the presence of mental-health-related policy, in the form of an emerging mental health

Let's talk about it

Join us for a virtual, live forum about how the mental health crisis is impacting our youth.

What: A panel discussion of students and professionals moderated by The San Diego Union-Tribune

When: 6:30 p.m., Wednesday, Aug. 2, for about 90 minutes

Register now: bit.ly/UTmentalhealthforum

curriculum and excused absences for mental health reasons within the San Diego Unified School District. These changes continue to benefit students, and sets an example for other institutions.

Coping mechanisms and resources are very broad terms that describe the various lifelines available to anyone struggling with their mental health. In my experience, a lot of people struggle to live in any specific moment (or stay "present"), regardless of what might be impacting their mental health. The first strategy I suggest is to find something (like a hobby) that grounds you, and then consistently build in time for you to do that, undisturbed. Another thing that has been effective for me is building in time, especially during busy periods, to separate yourself from every-

Mental health will always be more nuanced than it seems, so there is more hope than we think there is.

thing else and just sit and do nothing. I also endorse the benefits of exercise on fatigue and burnout, as well as yoga and meditation when you experience some sort of tension. I'm simply sharing a few aspects of my own experience, but there are professionals (online and otherwise) who can help you find what works for you.

There are many available mental health resources, including therapy and additional avenues for stress relief and other needs. Please visit tinyurl.com/swear resources for a comprehensive list of websites with information about teen mental health policy, resources and more. This is a list compiled by members of the Student Wellness Education and Resources, or SWEAR, committee, which is run by students across the San Diego Unified School District.

Issues like mental health will always be more nuanced than they may seem, which also means there is more hope than we think there is. We've all had to be a lot more resilient than we thought we could be, and now we're learning to cope with that. As a result, all young people deserve support, and there is a light at the end of the tunnel if we continue to believe that it exists.

Alcorn is an incoming theater major at UCLA and lives in San Diego.

WHAT STUDENTS HAVE IN COMMON WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE

BY SARAH BHATTI,
BETTYE CHARGIN
& KAYLA TON

There are two things that students attending the illustrious UC San Diego have probably experienced at some point — struggling with the insanely expensive housing market and dealing with stress or mental health issues.

Well, we students are not alone.

People experiencing homelessness also struggle with maintaining their mental health and with navigating the increasingly steep housing market. So why do we sympathize with one group and not the other?

When people start to realize that the homeless population is not some "other" population but are people who face the same issues, that can change how they are treated.

Although San Diego is well known for its military presence and resulting patriotic atmosphere, hundreds of veterans are left homeless on these same streets. We're all familiar with how veterans are verbally thanked for their service, given shopping discounts and celebrated during holidays.

But, deep down, do we really make any efforts to take care of them when they return from service or acknowledge the trauma they have endured?

Veterans commonly have to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries, which are major risk factors of homelessness. Other risk factors that

veterans typically must live with are substance abuse and a low income. When such disadvantages are a result of their service, it may be difficult for them to be able both to work and to adjust back to civilian life. In addition, being left without treatment and clinical care for physical and mental disabilities might make experiencing a fulfilling life a challenging endeavor.

When you consider the challenges that we as college students face — from affordable housing to mental health and identity — we must deal with many of the same issues as the unhoused.

It sadly does not stop there, as homelessness touches many other communities throughout San Diego, including students and the LGBTQ+ population.

The LGBTQ+ homeless population in particular faces distinct obstacles and disparities within the larger San Diego homeless community. A study done by UCLA in 2012 estimated that up to 40 percent of homeless individuals in San Diego identify as LGBTQ+, highlighting the disproportionate representation of this community among the homeless population despite being a small fraction of the overall population. The underlying causes of this disparity are complex but can include factors like familial rejection, discrimination and limited access to essential health care

and social services. In addition, this group often endures heightened rates of violence, mental health challenges and substance abuse, thereby intensifying its vulnerability. National data indicates that a significant amount of college students identify as LGBTQ+ and face housing insecurity, which is especially prevalent at UC San Diego, located in expensive La Jolla. These

be months long.

It's also important to acknowledge a college student staple — irresponsible levels of drinking and drug use, both of which are done liberally with little to no social repercussions from peers.

As students, we find it easy to avoid judging fellow students for struggling with mental health, or even for partaking in regular alcohol or drug use. We also don't blame them for the difficulties they face trying to find housing. In fact, UC San Diego even has resources in place to help, such as UC San Diego's Basic Needs Hub, which offers emergency housing assistance.

When you consider these challenges — from affordable housing to mental health and identity — we as college students have a lot more in common with the unhoused than it seems. With these considerations, isn't it about time we stop treating those without housing as if they are undeserving of support? As if they don't deserve to be treated with the basic respect that all human beings deserve?

Every major positive change begins with compassion, and it's about time we extend that level of understanding to those experiencing homelessness so together, we can be the generation that creates a more equitable and safer future for us all.

Bhatti, Chargin and **Ton** are all recent graduate students of psychology at UC San Diego and members of Compassion in Action: UCSD Students for Homeless Mental Wellness. They all live in San Diego.